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18. Morocco: Competitive Authoritarianism in Media Reforms

Bouziane Zaid and Mohammed Ibahrine

The chapter provides an account of why the media structure in Morocco is an uneven playing field with the state having the advantage. It argues that observable configurations of power over media are mainly tied to a repressive media culture and heritage that can be fairly described as a competitive authoritarian regime. Argumentation is supported by an analysis of Morocco's history and the political economy of media.

Background

Located in northwest Africa, Morocco borders the Mediterranean Sea to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, Algeria to the east, and Mauritania to the south. The Strait of Gibraltar spans 14 kilometers of water that separate Spain from Morocco, which makes the country a gateway for illegal immigration to Europe. As a result, Morocco became a key European ally in the effort to contain the flow of illegal immigration from sub-Saharan Africa. In terms of demographics, according to the 2017 government census bureau, the population was at 35.5 million, 27% of which were under the age of 15, 61% urban, 51% females, and 49% males. The unemployment rate was at 10.2%, and the illiteracy rate was high at 30%. Life expectancy at birth is currently 76. The official languages, as stated in the 2011 Constitution, are Arabic and Amazigh.

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Amazigh is a branch of the Afroasiatic language family and is spoken by the Imazighen (Berbers), who are indigenous to North Africa.

The majority of Moroccans today are Muslims, but an influential minority of Moroccan Jews remains in the country. Christians and other religious groups make up 1% of the populace, consisting mainly of foreign residents.

Although the 2011 constitution guarantees equal gender rights, real equality is still a long way off. In 2004, Morocco adopted a family code known as the *mudawana*, which was hailed by women's rights groups in Morocco and abroad as a major step forward. Civil society groups, which are fighting for women's rights, are dynamic and have managed to introduce major changes in Morocco's laws. In addition to the *mudawana*, these groups mobilized the political elite in 2006 to change equal nationality rights, allowing Moroccan women to pass on their citizenship to their children the same way Moroccan men can. More recently, they led a national debate on Article 475 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which allows rapists to avoid prosecution if they agree to marry their victims. Street and online protests were sparked in March 2012 when 16-year-old Amina Filali took her own life after a seven-month ordeal in which she was forced to wed her alleged rapist. Women's rights activists successfully used street demonstrations and social media platforms to rally popular support for changes to the law. In January 2014, the parliament unanimously amended Article 475.

The Western Sahara represents an ongoing major conflict involving Morocco, the Polisario, and Algeria. It was annexed by Morocco after Spain left in 1975. The legal status of the southern territory and the question of its sovereignty remain unresolved. The threat of terrorism continues to be another important issue. On 16 May 2003 Morocco was subject to the deadliest terrorist attacks in the country's history. Five explosions killed 43 people and injured more than 100 people in suicide bomb attacks in Morocco's largest city, Casablanca. The 14 suicide bombers all originated from a poor suburban neighborhood in the outskirts of Casablanca. A public debate ensued in the print and broadcast media, questioning the relationship between poverty and extremism.

In the context of the Arab uprisings, a protest movement known as the February 20 Movement held rallies and marches throughout

the country in 2011 to demand democratic reforms, a parliamentary monarchy, social justice, the end of absolutism, and the abolition of corruption. The movement triggered a series of reforms initiated by the monarchy. Two weeks after the first demonstration on 20 February, King Mohammed VI responded by introducing constitutional reforms. He promised to relinquish some of his administrative powers and to devolve some of his executive powers to the head of government and the parliament.

The promises made in the "9 March speech" did not materialize in the contents of the new constitution. A study (Madani, Maghraoui, & Zerhouni, 2012) of the new constitution found that the King remained "at the center of political and constitutional life" (p. 4). The study added that, in contradiction to the "9 March speech," in which the King insisted on the notion of accountability, the King had maintained executive powers without accountability to the Moroccan public (Madani et al., 2012, p. 50).

Despite these issues, Morocco's civil society is dynamic. Activists use their constitutional rights to protest and take advantage of various social media tools to educate, organize, and mobilize people on a wide range of issues. In April 2018, a group of activists launched a campaign to boycott products from three major companies to protest increases in the cost of living. The boycott targeted Centrale Danone (dairy products), Sidi Ali (mineral water), and Afriquia (gas stations). The economic impact of the boycott was evident ten days after it started when Afriquia and Centrale Danone recorded major drops in market value on the Casablanca Stock Exchange, with shares of each falling by nearly 6%.

In terms of media consumption, television remains the primary media of information and entertainment given Morocco's high rates of illiteracy, lack of local digital content creation, and shortage of digital literacy skills. In a recent survey, 68% of youths stated they watch television and 54.5% listen to the radio, spending on average two hours and 14 minutes watching television and two hours and 52 minutes listening to the radio (Morocco World News, 2019). Satellite broadcasting is the dominant form of transmitting television signals, and access to television and satellite dishes is almost universal. The most remarkable change in Internet use continues to be the growing

interest in domestic portals (Zaid, 2017). In 2010, the country's top 10 most visited websites did not include any Moroccan news sites. By 2018, the list included six Moroccan websites—three news sites, two classified ad platforms (Avito and Jumia), and one sports site. In 2019, the country's top ten most visited websites included seven Moroccan websites, three news sites, one classified ad platforms (Avito), and two sports news websites. The remaining three are *Google*, *Facebook*, and *YouTube*. *Chouftv* surpassed *YouTube* to rank second, and *Hespress* and *2M* surpassed *Facebook* to rank third and fourth, respectively (Ibahrine, 2020).

For print newspapers, circulation is estimated at 350,000; less than one percent of the population reads a newspaper every day. These numbers are likely to decrease, given the easy access to online news (Ibahrine, 2020).

Historical Developments

Moroccan media roots can be traced back to the colonial period when Morocco was a protectorate of France and Spain from 1912 to 1956 (Ibahrine, 2009; Zaid, 2010). The colonial powers introduced the print press in its modern form, and Spain played an essential role in establishing several publications in the northern cities of Ceuta, Tangiers, and Tetouan. As early as 1820, the Spanish periodical *El Liberal Africano* was published in Ceuta (Ibahrine, 2009; Zaid, 2017). Unlike radio, which was controlled by foreign powers from 1928 until independence in 1956, print media represented a site of political struggle. Moroccan nationalists published their first Arabic papers, *Lisan Al-Maghreb* and *Sinan Al-Qalam*, in 1907 to promote nationalist ideas among educated Moroccan elites as tools of liberation. The French colonialists responded by introducing several Press Codes to administer and regulate the nationalist print press. The first legislation was the Dahir (Decree) of April 1912, followed by a series of decrees that demanded prior authorizations and allowed the colonial powers to shut down publications deemed too critical. After independence in 1956, the print press remained a tool that was used widely in the struggle between the state and the opposition parties.

The French were the first to start broadcasting in Morocco in February 1928, when radio signals were sent from the city of Rabat. The first television station, *Telma*, also in French, began airing its programs in 1952. After independence, the government launched the Radiodiffusion et Télévision Marocaine (RTM) in 1962, which consisted of four radio stations and one television station. In 1989, the first terrestrial pay-television channel in the Arab world, *2M International*, began transmission from Casablanca (Ibahrine, 2009; Zaid, 2010).

A brief look at the history of the Internet shows that it has been available to the public since November 1995. Research universities were the first to adopt and use it. Morocco's first Internet café opened in 1996 in Rabat. In 1996, there were about 50 websites, but in July 2019, there were 100,618 registered domain names, with 74,717 with the.ma extension.

Until the mid-1990s, the culture of media in Morocco was authoritarian, administrative, and partisan (Zaid & Ibahrine, 2011). It was authoritarian and administrative in that the state controlled the financing, regulation, production, and distribution of broadcast media, which was considered the most influential media. It was partisan in that print media were mainly controlled by political parties. Given the low literacy rates, print media was not seen as a great threat to the regime; instead, maintaining complete state control over broadcasting was seen as essential. Print media became, after independence, a site of political tension between the opposition political parties and the monarchy (Zaid, El Kaddoussi, & Ibahrine, 2020).

Opposition leaders used newspapers and magazines as their chief weapons of political contestation. The era from 1961 to 1997 under the rule of King Hassan II has been labeled the "Years of Lead" because of the rampant repression, injustice, corruption, and media censorship, and the widespread imprisonment, murder, and "disappearance" of journalists and political opponents of the regime (Zaid, El Kaddoussi, & Ibahrine, 2020).

Like many countries in the early postcolonial era, Morocco perceived the role of media as a nation-building instrument (Zaid, 2017). Morocco was a proponent of the modernization theory which conceived development in terms of industrialization, transfer of technology and innovation, and economic growth. According to a study

by the Moroccan Ministry of Social Development (2006), development programs and policy in Morocco during the 1950s and 1960s were in line with the modernization paradigm and consisted of investments in economic infrastructure and technology. In this paradigm, the mass media, or what Lerner (1958) called the mobility multiplier, represents the main tool and transmitter of modern values and information, and could even function as a surrogate for travel. Morocco's state-controlled media system was therefore mandated at the outset with the role of modernizing the economy and serving as an instrument for education and social change (El Kadoussi, 2016). It was argued that privately-owned media would be motivated to seek profits, and this would deprive the Moroccan population of content that fulfilled educational and informational values. For instance, in the 1960s, King Hassan II (1961–1999) mobilized radio and television for political awareness and education, including preparations for the country's first general elections and a constitutional referendum in 1962 (Ibahrine, 2007). The primary purpose was to modernize; human rights were of secondary consideration.

The major improvements in the relationship between the political establishment and mass media occurred when the oppositional socialist government was elected in 1997, a process consolidated under the reign of King Mohammed VI. After he succeeded his father Hassan II in July 1999, Mohammed VI instantly became a symbol of hope for a more democratic and freer Morocco (El Kadoussi, 2016). The mission of the 1997 government was to enact political reforms aimed at promoting human rights, civil liberties, and an open, pluralist media, and to establish the rule of law. One of the first major pro-human rights measures under the young King Mohammed VI was the 2003 creation of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC), which investigated human rights violations from the "Years of Lead" to establish the truth. The Commission organized public forums in 2004 in which victims voiced their pain and suffering under the old regime. These forums were broadcast live on television—a very important moment in Moroccan television history. Another major initiative was the Family Status Law, or *mudawana*, decreed in 2004 to protect the rights of women. To safeguard and promote Amazigh language and culture, Mohammed VI created the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (L'Institut Royal de la Culture

Amazighe [IRCAM]). The Imazighen constituted a large ethnic group whose culture had been undermined for decades. These positive reforms earned the new king political capital and furthered his legitimacy.

The media benefited from this political opening. All sectors—print, broadcast, and digital—witnessed significant growth during the period. The High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (Haute Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle [HACA]) was established under the Dahir (Royal Decree) of 31 August 2002 as an independent administrative body in charge of regulating audiovisual communication. The partial liberalization and modernization of the audiovisual sector allowed new commercial radio and television stations to emerge. The new private radio stations, which grew from two in 2005 to 16 in 2009, reinvigorated the broadcast landscape, especially through their live debate shows and news programs. They introduced the impetus and space to create possibilities for national debates on a variety of social, educational, and health-related issues. Government restrictions on print media also eased.

During this period, a new generation of young journalists pushed the boundaries of the comfort zone of mainstream media and society at large. Many taboos were broken, from discussing the king's salary to reporting on the arrest of high officials close to the palace. Morocco was also spared the draconian measures used in other authoritarian countries against the Internet, such as the blocking of social media platforms or web content. Moroccan citizens can, to this day, create websites and write for blogs without any registration requirements imposed by the government (Zaid, El Kaddoussi, & Ibahrine, 2020).

However, while the ERC, the *mudawana*, and the IRCAM have been positive developments, they have not constituted serious opportunities for challenging the status quo in Morocco. The state continues to use legal and financial penalties to keep the most critical voices in line. A record number of libel and defamation suits were filed against print media in the years following these reforms. Broadcasts remained under close state supervision via HACA. Internet use was and remains closely monitored through state surveillance. These setbacks led to the 2011 protest movement during the Arab uprisings, leading to constitutional reforms.

Political System and Legal Framework

Morocco is a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament, but the King maintains executive powers without accountability to the Moroccan public (Madani et al., 2012). Morocco's political regime can be best characterized as a competitive authoritarian regime.

Competitive authoritarian regimes use elements of democracy to ensure domination over the other opposition forces in the country. Levitsky and Way (2002) defined competitive authoritarianism as civilian regimes in which "formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which fraud, civil liberties violations, and abuse of state and media resources so skew the playing field that the regime cannot be labeled democratic" (p. 4). These regimes are competitive in the sense that the democratic institutions are real and that "opposition forces can use legal channels to seriously contest for (and occasionally win) power; but they are authoritarian in that opposition forces are handicapped by a highly uneven—and even dangerous—playing field. Competition is thus real but unfair" (p. 4). Competitive authoritarian regimes are characterized by the presence of some democratic institutions and some democratic practices such as elections, a multiparty system, and, in this case, a self-proclaimed independent media regulator and a new press law. We argue that Morocco's media reforms are in line with this vision of governance, whereby the state creates democratic institutions to use as a site of struggle with opposition forces while steadfastly maintaining control by establishing an uneven playing field.

Morocco's media system offers a good illustration of the complex process of media reform during political transitions. As a competitive authoritarian regime, the state uses democratic institutions to reform its media system, while entrenching these institutions via authoritarian laws. Morocco has witnessed periods of tight authoritarian control and periods of reformist tendencies. This cyclical fluctuation has resulted in significant progress in media structure and performance and, at the same time, in the state maintaining its control over the media landscape through various mechanisms of repression.

A case in point is the public service sector. The legal framework and institutional structure provide the conditions for public service to

materialize but do not guarantee its performance. The nondemocratic culture of the country is the main deterrent for public service media. A competitive authoritarian regime has stifled the attempt to transform broadcasting from a state-controlled institution into a public service entity. The 2005 Audiovisual Communication Law put an end to the state's monopoly over broadcasting management. The most positive development has been the establishment of a legal framework for private ownership. However, the law contains provisions that allow the state to interfere with program content and to put limits on private ownership.

In addition to HACA, Moroccan Radio and Television (Radiodiffusion et Télévision Marocaine), the institution that earlier managed state television and radio, was transformed from a subsidiary of the Ministry of Communication to a public entity, the National Company of Radio and Television (La Société Nationale de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision [SNRT]) in April 2005. Self-proclaimed as independent, the SNRT manages nine public television stations and six public radio stations and is not subject to administrative control and supervision by the Ministry.

However, HACA's High Council consists of nine members, five of whom are appointed by the king, including the president. The king also appoints the president of the SNRT. The state, therefore, assimilated the broadcast regulator into authoritarian strategies of governance, using them to upgrade their capacity to control broadcasting by entrenching them in a multilayered architecture of control, namely the unrepresentative appointment process of its decision-making bodies and the repressive media laws. State control over the appointment process of the regulatory bodies is not an uncommon practice in most democracies. But, in mature democracies, systems of checks and balances exist whereby political power is not concentrated in the hands of a few, and one governance entity cannot hold too much power (Zaid, 2018). This is not the case for Morocco, which failed to transform state broadcasting into public media and continues its history of state broadcasting as an instrument of propaganda and political control.

The 2011 constitution entails provisions that guarantee freedom of expression, as well as caveats limiting this freedom. Article 25 guarantees Moroccan citizens "freedoms of thought, opinion, and expression in all their forms," and Article 28 states that "freedom of the press is

guaranteed and may not be limited by any form of prior censorship." (El Kadoussi, 2020).

However, Article 19 puts limits on Morocco's adherence to international conventions on human rights, which has direct implications for the media by introducing two constraining phrases "with respect for the provisions of the constitution's permanent characteristics and the laws of the kingdom." Although the 2011 constitution strengthened the judiciary as a separate branch of government, it is far from independent in Morocco, leaving the media without adequate protection by the law (El Kadoussi, 2018).

The 2016 Press Code brought about many positive advances, but a close look at the text shows that the oppressive nature of the legal environment in the country has not significantly changed. The positive adjustments include the elimination of jail sentences for journalists and the establishment of a self-regulatory body, the National Press Council. The law also carries specific provisions to regulate digital media. However, the three taboo topics—monarchy, Western Sahara, and Islam—were preserved in the new code, and jail sentences were replaced by steep fines. Failure to pay the fines can lead to jail terms, and at the same time, the Penal Law, which stipulates jail sentences for any offense against taboo topics, can be used to prosecute journalists. The Anti-Terrorism Law, passed in 2003 after the terrorist attacks in Casablanca on 16 May, gave the government sweeping legal powers to control any media content that is deemed to "disrupt public order by intimidation, force, violence, fear or terror." Ostensibly intended to combat terrorism, the authorities have wide latitude in defining vague terms such as "national security" and "public order," opening the door for abuse.

Moroccan authorities use nuanced means to limit online content and violate users' rights. For example, while websites are rarely blocked, problematic press and anti-terrorism laws place heavy burdens on intermediaries and result in the closure of news sites.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) (2019) ranked Morocco 135th of 180 countries in its annual press freedom index primarily due to the prosecutions of journalists. Media watchdog organizations such as RSF and Freedom House include in their annual reports the number and names of jailed journalists each year. Moreover, many prominent

publication directors and editors such as Aboubakr Jamai, Ahmed Benchemsi, and Ali Lemrabet have resigned from their positions and live in self-imposed exile in Western countries (Zaid, 2017).

Economy and Ownership Patterns

Morocco's media system consists of a mix of public and private ownership and allows the government's intervention to ensure public service. Moroccan media outlets use two main financing models. The first is advertising. The media firms expose audiences to advertising messages in exchange for free content. This is the dominant business model in Morocco's media which permeates both public service and non-public service media content providers. The second is subsidy. The government pays media firms in return for public service. This applies to public service television and radio, as well as political party newspapers. The aim, as stated by the government, is to help these media firms be more independent and distanced from all vested economic interests.

Whereas neither public service television nor political party newspapers are free of advertising, public service radio is advertising-free and offers a wide range of publicly relevant news and information programming. Against this backdrop, the advertising industry cannot support sustainable media business models. In addition to the deteriorating advertising market, an estimated 70% to 80% of Moroccan advertisers use global online platforms such as *Google* and *Facebook*, whose market share will continue to grow at the expense of local websites. According to the Group of Moroccan Advertisers, the total advertising market stood at USD 596 million in 2017, USD 18 million more than in 2016. In 2018, the big advertisers, the telecom operators, banks, and the food sector lowered their advertising budgets by 14.6%, 14.7%, and 10%, respectively (Hespress, 2019).

The advertising budget is distributed not based on professional, standardized, and transparent criteria, but on who is close to the center of power. Advertising revenue provided by the government or government-linked companies is not split equitably between independent and pro-government publications. In a recent example, the Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP) and Caisse de Dépôt et de Gestion (CDG), two state-owned companies that do not offer any particular products to Moroccan

consumers, bought advertising time and space. This move was meant to secure advertising funding the state can use to reward obedience.

Current regulatory practices aim to reduce media ownership concentration, but they fail to encourage pluralism in media ownership. In Morocco, the absence of concentration does not necessarily imply an increase in pluralism. According to the Press and Publications Code, any media organization in the broadcast industry cannot hold an investment in the capital of more than one print media company. Any person owning 30% or more of a newspaper company has to declare it to the National Press Council. Any newspaper or magazine that owns 10% or more of the capital of another newspaper or magazine has to declare it to the National Press Council. Internet service providers (ISPs) cannot own part of the capital of another ISP (Le Desk & Reporters Without Borders, 2017). Article 21 of the Audiovisual Communication Law limits the concentration of ownership in broadcasting except for state-controlled television and radio. In the first and second waves of licensing in 2006 and 2009, HACA granted licenses only to state-owned television stations and to a mix of state and private radio stations (18 of the latter). Television stations such as *Arriadiya* for sports and *Al-Maghribia* for the Moroccan diaspora, and private radio stations such as *Hitradio* and *Aswat* were all licensed during this phase. Ownership of private radio reflects closeness to the regime power structure (Le Desk & Reporters Without Borders, 2017), hence, the lack of pluralism. The list includes owners of pro-government print media organizations, such as Abdelmounaim Dilami and Moulay Hafid El-Alami; members of the administrative (pro-government) political party, such as Abdelaziz Akhenouch and Mouncif Belkhayat; and former employees of the state-owned television and radio stations, such as Kamal Lahlou. In the second wave of licensing in 2009, HACA declined five private television license applications on the grounds of a "deteriorating situation in the advertising market," and the need to "maintain the stability and viability of existing public and private operators." It exclusively justified these decisions on a financial basis. Article 21 stipulates that any broadcasting company or shareholder can own shares in another broadcasting company up to a maximum of 30% of its holdings. This was intended to prevent any individual or company from controlling more than one media outlet. Aside from state control over broadcasting, only a handful of media companies owned by key

pro-government political players, such as the Caractères Media Group, EcoMédias Group, and Maroc Soir Group, control a few media outlets in print, online, and broadcasting. No single company has control over a significant audience share.

Some of Morocco's billionaires, such as Moulay Hafid El-Alami, Aziz Akhannouch, Othman Benjelloun, and Meriem Bensaleh Chaqroun, have stakes in five of the nine French-language publications including *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc*, *La Vie Eco*, *Les Inspirations Eco*, *La Nouvelle Tribune*, and *L'Economiste*. Currently, two of them are also ministers (Le Desk & Reporters Without Borders, 2017). The publications are editorially pro-government, and they benefit from advertising despite their limited circulation. This close relationship between economic power and the French-language media has created an unhealthy media market because these newspapers receive an advertising budget regardless of their primary circulation and readership. This promotes a culture of clientelism, which is harmful to media transparency and professionalism. Ostensibly, media in Morocco have been strongly controlled by political and economic clientelism. These political leaders need these publications for reputation management and to play down corruption scandals and ensure electoral campaign success (Benchenna, Ksikes, & Marchetti, 2017). This clientelism is also a manifestation of the rentier state in Morocco. If the freedom of the press is to be respected, independence from government interference and big money are vital.

Technology and Infrastructure

In the context of the liberalization of the ICT sector in the 1990s, the 1996 Law 24–96 ended the monopoly of state-owned *Maroc Télécom.* Morocco set up a regulatory body to come up with the country's vision for ICT. Three companies provide telecom services in Morocco. Initially owned by the state, *Maroc Télécom* became private in 1998. The French firm *Vivendi* acquired 35% of its shares in the company in 2001. In 2013, *Etisalat*, an Emirati telecom operator, acquired 53% of *Vivendi*'s stake for USD 5.6 billion (Oxford Business Group, 2019). *Orange Morocco* became the first fully private operator to enter the Moroccan market in 2000 (known then as *Médi-Télécom*, a private consortium led by Spain's *Telefonica*). It is now the market's second largest telecom operator. In

2007, *Inwi* (formerly *Maroc Connect*) became the third largest telecom company in Morocco. *Inwi* is a subsidiary of the SNI group, the leading Moroccan industrial, financial, and services conglomerate owned by the monarch. Telecommunications is the most dynamic sector in the industry, with mobile data services leading the way.

In 2009, the government launched the national strategy "Digital Morocco 2013" to consolidate ICT industries, to support the automation of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to boost e-government services, and to foster the dissemination of ICT usage among Moroccan households. Subsequent to Digital Morocco 2013, Morocco launched "Digital Morocco 2020," which relies on three main pillars: 1) adopting smart government services and facilitating the adoption of digital devices among Moroccan households; 2) positioning Morocco as a strategic digital hub in French-speaking Africa and enabling the development of business process outsourcing services with high added values; and 3) upskilling human capital to increase the competitiveness of the economy (Oxford Business Group, 2019). The government invested USD 750 million to reduce the digital divide by 50% through the digitization of administrative services, improved access to the Internet through free Wi-Fi in public spaces, and digital literacy programs (Ministry of Industry, Investment, Commerce, and Digital Economy, 2019).

One of the results of Digital Morocco 2020 is the expansion of e-commerce platforms. In 2015, Morocco managed to reach a total of 11.7 million credit cards (Oxford Business Group, 2019). The rise of e-commerce is supported by electronic payment. Out of a total of 18.3 million Internet users, 900,000 are considered regular e-consumers (Oxford Business Group, 2019). In 2019, e-commerce growth was mainly driven by increased smartphone penetration and the rollout of the 4G network.

The development of IT services has been supported by the many technology parks that host more than 100 IT companies, including Dell, IBM, Accenture, Atos, HP, and Logica and more than 1,000 start-ups. Over the last few years, Morocco has created four technoparks in the four largest Moroccan cities Casablanca, Rabat, Tangiers, and Agadir. The mission of these technoparks, which facilitate importing and exporting IT-related services, is to assist in the creation and

development of companies in ICT and to promote innovation, training, and technological support.

Morocco is now among the top ten African nations in terms of digital development (Oxford Business Group, 2019). The government efforts have resulted in high proportions of households with Internet access. According to the Agence Nationale de Réglementation des Télécommunications (2019), 74.2% of Moroccan households are now equipped with Internet, 99.8% have mobile phones, and of these, 75.7% have smartphones. The leading motivation for the adoption of the Internet and mobile phones is to enjoy entertainment content, such as games and social media platforms (95.2%), and to access the news (86.1%). Despite significant efforts by the government to integrate ICTs properly into the country's development agenda, the ICT Development Index ranked Morocco 100 out of a total of 176 countries (International Telecommunication Union, 2017).

Challenges

Three main areas represent challenges to the current system: quality media content, economic sustainability, and disrupting technologies. The rise of sponsored content, misinformation, sensationalism, and poor-quality journalism, particularly in online media, have raised serious concerns about the quality of information Moroccan audiences receive. Entertainment and celebrity stories have increased at the expense of news on national affairs. This dismal picture is the result of several factors, including the fierce competition over audience attention, the logic of algorithm-driven platforms, and the integration of the editorial, marketing, and analytics functions in the digital news industry. The value of news stories is no longer based on the standard quality but on a range of metrics, including the number of visits, hits, and views.

Another factor that negatively affects the quality of content is the journalists' education and training. Journalism seems to have become the profession of those who have no profession. In November 2016 and on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the *2M TV* show *Sabahiyat* featured a tutorial to show women how to cover domestic violence facial bruises with makeup.

In January 2019, a journalist at *Al-Ayam* newspaper interviewed an orphaned seven-year-old girl about her experience of her mother's murder. Both events triggered a vast wave of criticism from social media users and activists who denounced the unethical practices of the journalists.

In terms of economic sustainability, clientelism and the unfair distribution of advertising money continue to represent a threat to media business models. In January 2018, the government placed an additional financial burden on the fragile media sector by imposing a 5% tax on digital advertising.

In terms of technology, disruptive technologies are aggravating the fragility of the business models of the print media, despite government subsidies. Moroccan websites depend on revenue streams built on the commercialization of media platforms such as *Google*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and other global tech companies. Reliance on social media platforms has created a major structural shift in news production, distribution, and monetization. The tech giants deprive local news websites of vital revenue streams and sources. A local business in Casablanca will achieve a higher yield return on investment when it advertises with *Google* and *Facebook* than with a local news organization. The former will deliver local customers to the local business in a more efficient way than a local news organization serving the local news needs of the same local customers. This situation has had severe consequences for the revenue streams of news websites. Digitalization has been making the profession of a journalist in Morocco more volatile and insecure.

In line with competitive authoritarianism, Morocco failed to liberalize the media and has continued its history of state-controlled media as instruments of political control. As a competitive authoritarian regime, the state created democratic institutions such as HACA and SNRT to reform its media system while entrenching these institutions via authoritarian laws. The locus of power over the media includes licensing and policy formulation, but it also reaches into editorial decisions. Without the sincere political will to reform the media ecosystem, positive change in the quality of content and revenue streams is likely to remain a long-term proposition.

Outlook

As elsewhere, news and content providers should improve their competitiveness and ensure that more readers browse their media platforms. However, to further enhance the level of attractiveness in a highly competitive media content market, these news content providers such as print media, broadcast media, and digital platforms are called to personalize their news content over multi-cross platforms and different devices. Rather than targeting readers as a whole, news and content providers (media organizations) will realize that real value is in the market of one reader/consumer. The emerging world of media has become more personal than ever before, where readers access their news and media content through their personal and mobile devices. The personalization of news and media content is likely to take another dimension when the superfast 5G enters the Moroccan telecom market. Huawei, a global provider of ICT infrastructure, has been closely working with the Moroccan government and the three Moroccan telecoms operators to launch 5G and will make Morocco the first country in Africa to do so.

Over the next five years, digital advertising will continue to thrive and become strong and mature due to factors such as the high levels of connectivity, social media usage, digital platforms penetration, and mobile device adoption. Moroccan policymakers are well-advised to design flexible regulatory frameworks to protect Moroccan readers and their data. At the center of any regulatory framework, the critical issues at hand should include business models, disruptive technologies, trust, and regulation.

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